Thomas A.J. Crist and Daniel G. Roberts

Engaging the Public Through Mortuary Archeology

Philadelphia's First African Baptist Church Cemeteries

...our particular species is utterly distinctive in this regard, that our very concept of who we are and of our basic worth is inextricably bound up in our abiding impulse to honor and memorialize our dead...the simple act of respect for the dead that is, in its essence, an expression of respect for their lives.

*—Newsweek**

Photos courtesy John Milner Associates, Inc.

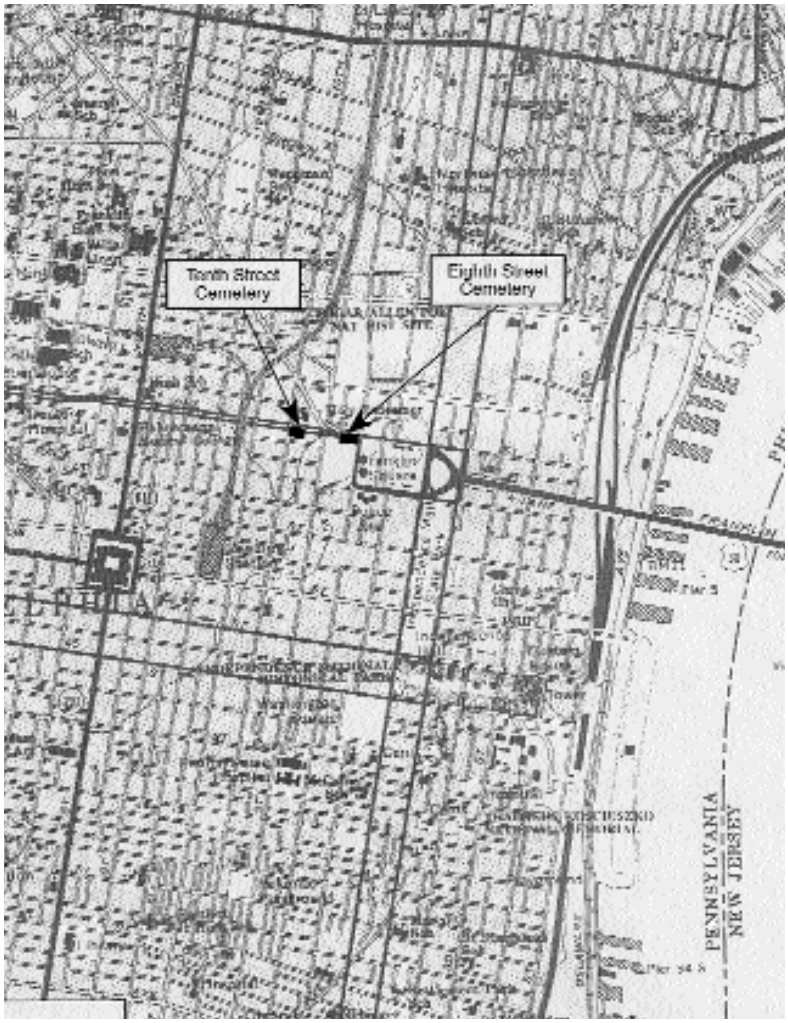
In today's economic and political climate it is fundamentally important for archeologists to promote archeology to the public. This is especially true since public dollars fund the vast majority of archeological research currently conducted in the United States. While many archeological projects are worthy of, and indeed attract, public attention, it is mortuary archeology projects that frequently elicit the most intense public interest and community response. As such, historical cemetery archeology provides a natural educational forum through which archeologists can reach and engage the public.

Over the past two decades, most of the historical cemetery excavations conducted in the United States were undertaken in compliance with federal preservation mandates, especially the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. These laws and implementing regulations make cultural resource consideration an important aspect of the environmental and land planning processes. Local and state ordinances regarding abandoned or unrecorded cemeteries are also frequently invoked when development threatens a historical burial ground. Along with federal preservation legislation, local and state statutes offer various levels of protection for undocumented cemeteries. While many of these statutes fall short in terms of enforcement, their existence has facilitated either the avoidance or the professional archeological excavation of numerous historical cemeteries.

Members of the First African Baptist Church and the project team prepare for the Tenth Street Cemetery Reburial Ceremony at Eden Cemetery on May 8,1995. The human remains were reinterred in a plot adjacent to those from the Eighth Street cemetery, buried in 1987.

The past two decades have also witnessed a fundamental change in the way archeologists and anthropologists approach their research. Two sociopolitical currents have come together to make anthropologists realize that they no longer have complete domain over the data they can potentially collect. First, various Native American groups have begun to assert their claims to cultural property, whether newly discovered or held by American museums, particularly human remains and grave goods associated with their ancestors. This movement culminated in the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, enacted by Congress in 1990. This legislation protects Native American human remains and associated cultural items and sets out guidelines for the appropriate treatment of these materials. Second, the public has increasingly demanded an active role in scientific research, especially that which affects interpretations of the past. In the archeological realm these currents have resulted in a new focus on public outreach and the engaged involvement of communities descended from those buried in threatened cemeteries.

The inclusion of cultural, social, political, and spiritual components of historical cemeteries benefits both archeologists and the public at large (Crist, in press). For the archeologist, such inclusion serves to bring into clearer focus the non-scientific values embodied in past human remains. For the public, these projects serve to heighten



Although used by separate congregations, both First African Baptist Church cemeteries were located within two blocks of each other along the northern boundary of 19th-century Philadelphia. Today the Vine Expressway carries thousands of vehicles over the former site of the church's original meeting house. Drawing by Sarah Ruch.

awareness about the scientific value of studying past human remains while also enhancing knowledge about historical American social groups about which only incomplete documentation exists. Further, educational outreach programs that celebrate a past group's heritage frequently foster cultural pride and community involvement. Because people are interested, they often become active in exploring their community's history. Many times this interest extends to the children in the community, a traditional focus for many of the Archaeology Week programs sponsored by State Historic Preservation Offices around the country.

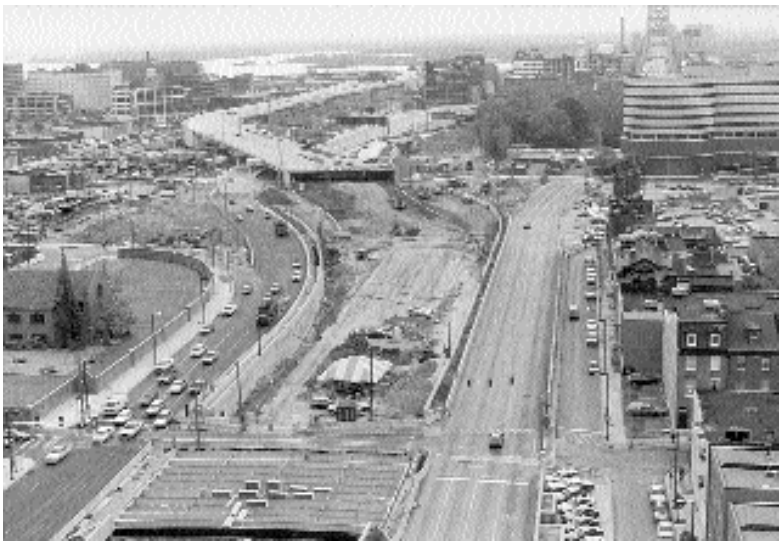
Public interest in African-American archeology has increased in recent years due to the excavation of several historical African-American cemeteries, most notably in Baltimore, Dallas, New York, St. Louis, and Philadelphia. These excavations were all necessitated because construction activities threatened unmarked burial grounds obscured by highways or modern buildings. In Philadelphia, the First African Baptist Church Cemetery Projects brought archeologists and the public together through a series of educational outreach efforts designed to engage the community in the excavation and analysis of remains from two separate cemetery sites (Roberts and McCarthy 1995). The results effectively focused public attention on the urban experience of Philadelphia's free African Americans during the first half of the 19th century. Close cooperation with the leaders and members of the current First African Baptist Church provided them with opportunities to learn more about the church's founding, as well as the growth and development of other African-American Baptist congregations in the region.

Thirteen African Americans founded the First African Baptist Church in 1809. The church subsequently split into two congregations in 1816. The splinter group relocated to property owned by the Reverend Henry Simmons at Eighth and Vine Streets about 1824 and buried their dead there until about 1842. The original congregation worshipped at a meeting house on Tenth Street below Vine, where a burial ground was used between circa 1810 and 1822. The Tenth Street church relocated to a building in south Philadelphia in 1906, where the congregation currently meets.

The Eighth Street cemetery, in use between circa 1823 and 1842, was discovered during archeological monitoring activities associated with the construction of a commuter rail tunnel in 1980. Excavated by archeologists from John Milner Associates, Inc. in 1983 and 1984, the remains of 140 individuals and associated mortuary artifacts were identified and carefully removed from the site.

Recognizing the keen public interest in the excavation of the Eighth Street cemetery, the archeologists erected a wooden platform at the site so that visitors could safely view the excavation in a panorama-like setting. Staff members from the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum, located three blocks from the former cemetery, provided organized tours from the platform's vantage point. Advertisements for the tours were placed in all major Philadelphia newspapers, including the African-American Philadelphia Tribune. Almost 3,000 people took advantage of these tours over the two field seasons, including school groups and numerous members of the First African Baptist Church congregation.

A significant area of community engagement centered on the current members of the First African Baptist Church. The archeological team apprised church members of the excavation's research design early on in the project and the latter actively participated in assembling data on the church's founding and early history. The scientific team periodically made presentations to the congregation regarding the excavations and actively solicited church members' input. Most significantly, members of the congregation became

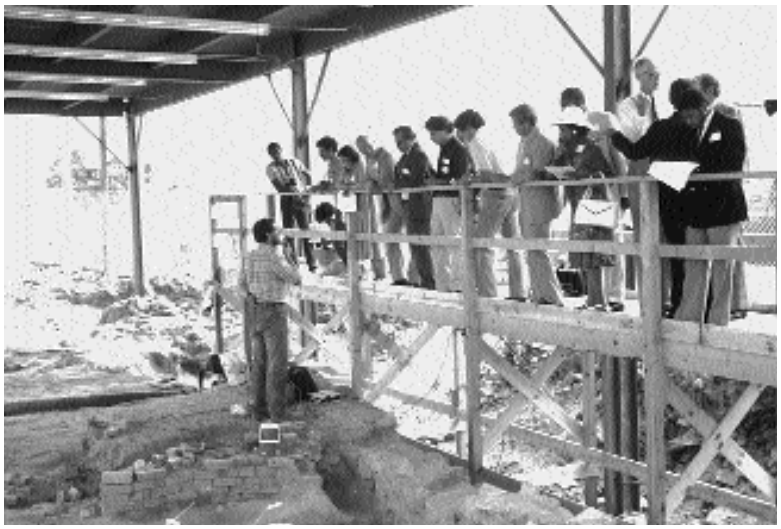


The Tenth Street cemetery site was located just west of the Benjamin Franklin Bridge between the eastbound and westbound lanes of Vine Street.A tent was erected to protect the human remains and associated artifacts during the excavation.

directly involved in planning the reburial of the human remains disinterred from the site. The reburial ceremony took place in July 1987 after three years of study at the Smithsonian Institution. The remains were reinterred at Eden Cemetery in neighboring Delaware County, presently used by the modern First African Baptist Church congregation.

Due in no small part to the active engagement of the African-American community and members of the church, media attention generated by the project was particularly positive. The local newspapers carried numerous articles about the excavation, while radio and television news programs devoted several segments to the project. A local filmmaker also produced a documentary video that chronicled the archeological investigation. Narrated by a prominent Philadelphian, the Reverend Paul Washington, the film *Ground Truth: Archaeology in the City* was released in 1988 and has been shown in classrooms across the nation and around the world.

John Milner Associates, Inc. also excavated the Tenth Street cemetery at the former site of the original church building. The Tenth Street site was identified prior to construction of the Vine Expressway through center-city Philadelphia and was excavated in 1990. This time the location of the site within the lanes of Vine Street precluded public observation of the excavation, although members of the congregation again visited the site on numerous occasions. Here, the archeologists excavated the skeletal remains of 89 individuals and associated funerary artifacts interred between circa 1810 and 1822, including well-preserved coffin hardware and clothing fragments. These remains were analyzed at John Milner Associates' Osteology Laboratory in Philadelphia, located four blocks from the site.



Nearly 3,000 people observed the excavation of the Eighth Street cemetery site in 1983 and 1984.The archeologists fielded questions from the visiting groups and also distributed a short brochure outlining the project and its progress.

Since public involvement during the Tenth Street cemetery excavation was limited, a concerted effort to engage the public in the laboratory analysis of the remains ensued. The firm hosted over 50 school groups and tours in the laboratory during the course of the subsequent several years of study. These groups ranged from first-graders to graduate students, with a particular emphasis on children from the inner-city schools. Groups from the Phil-A-Kids program sponsored by the local Atwater Kent Museum also toured the laboratory each summer during this phase of the project.

The highlight of the laboratory tours was an ancestral homecoming ceremony conducted in June 1993 by the project's cultural anthropologist for members of the First African Baptist Church congregation and other interested members of the community. This ceremony brought together the project's scientific team and the current members of the church to honor the spirits of those interred in the cemetery, discuss the findings of the analysis, and begin preparations for reburial of the human remains. In the months following the ceremony, church leaders actively planned the reinterment of the remains, again at Eden Cemetery, adjacent to the burial plot in which the Eighth Street cemetery remains were reburied in 1987. The Tenth Street cemetery reburial ceremony took place in May 1995 and was attended by over 40 members of the current church and most of the scientific team. At the congregation's request, the mortuary artifacts from the Tenth Street site are permanently curated at the Afro-American Cultural and Historical Museum in Philadelphia, completing the circle of engagement that began with the excavation of the Eighth Street cemetery 12 years earlier.

The two First African Baptist Church Cemetery Projects elicited the involvement of Philadelphia's African-American community in a meaningful exploration of its past. The research findings and public presentations made by the project team effectively focused public attention on

the many ways in which African Americans contributed to Philadelphia's history and society in general. Both projects highlighted the benefits of public outreach in mortuary archeology projects and underscored the potential to effectively engage the community in the various aspects of archeological excavation and analysis. They also emphatically demonstrated that involvement of the public in mortuary archeology projects has significant benefits for all, as long as archeologists are willing to recognize concerns of the interested or affected segments of the community and most importantly, respect those non-scientific values embodied by burial grounds and human remains that the community holds as important.

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* Quoted from an article by Meg Greenfield in *Newsweek*, April 22, 1996, p. 88.

Gregory F. Walwer

Combining Archival and Archeological Research

The Connecticut School for Boys Cemetery

When it was announced that state land which lies adjacent to the State Police Headquarters in Meriden, Connecticut would soon serve as grounds for a multi-million dollar hospital project, considerable public outrage ensued. Concerned citizens indicated that many adolescents were interred on the property when it was occupied by the Connecticut School for Boys, a reformatory and orphanage that operated between 1853 and 1973.

Also known as the Meriden School for Boys and the State Reform School, the facility housed up to several hundred juvenile males at any given time. Historic sources indicate that many of the boys who had died at the school were interred somewhere on the property. While none of the available records suggest which portion of the grounds was used as a cemetery, word of mouth and local newspaper accounts indicated to many that a small hill represented the principal burial grounds at the facility. In 1986, a monument marking the site was installed.

Despite this information, local citizens were convinced that the boys had been buried throughout the 50-acre property. To support this contention, they contrasted the small size of the hill with a list of well over 100 names of boys who they had determined to be buried at the facility. To add confusion to the matter, community members were concerned about several depressions in the earth, which were later found to correspond to areas of previous geological testing. As a result of vague historic information and intense concern expressed by local citizens, the Connecticut